

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

& THE ENLIGHTENMENT

From Reader of Enlightenment Ideas to Participant in the Transatlantic Enlightenment

Graphic Timeline — Franklin's Intellectual Journey

1704	Locke dies 2 years before Franklin is born	1751	Franklin writes on population, land & labor
1754	Albany Plan: union within the British Empire	1753-60s	Scientific fame; Copley Medal & European recognition
1760s-70s	Friendship and exchange with Hume, Smith & Scottish thinkers	1776	Smith publishes Wealth of Nations; Franklin signs Declaration
1787	Franklin, age 81, at Constitutional Convention		

The Central Question

WAS FRANKLIN ONLY A STUDENT? No. Franklin certainly absorbed European Enlightenment thought, but by middle age he had become an important Enlightenment figure himself. His relationships with European thinkers increasingly became exchanges among intellectual peers.

John Locke — An Earlier Influence

- John Locke (1632-1704) died before Franklin was born, so the two never met.
- Franklin matured in an intellectual world deeply shaped by Locke: natural rights, consent, toleration, representative institutions, property, and limited government.
- The Albany Plan has a broadly Enlightenment character: separate political communities voluntarily cooperate through a designed political structure.

CAUTION It is too simple to say “Locke caused the Albany Plan.” Franklin combined inherited British ideas, Enlightenment thought, colonial experience, Indigenous diplomacy, and an urgent military problem.

Franklin's Own Economic Thinking

- In 1751 Franklin published Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.
- He emphasized abundant American land, scarce labor, relatively high wages, early marriage, and rapid population growth.
- He estimated that colonial population could roughly double about every twenty years.

A FRANKLIN CHAIN OF REASONING

Abundant land → scarce labor → higher wages and opportunity → earlier marriage and larger families → rapid population growth and economic expansion.

Adam Smith — Influence Could Run Both Ways

- Adam Smith (1723-1790) was about seventeen years younger than Franklin.
- Franklin and Smith became personally acquainted in Britain and moved in overlapping Scottish Enlightenment circles.
- Smith was intensely interested in the North American colonies and later discussed their rapid growth in The Wealth of Nations (1776).

- Franklin possessed firsthand evidence about colonial wages, land, population, trade, taxation, and political institutions.
- Franklin's 1751 population essay preceded *The Wealth of Nations* by twenty-five years.

BEST CONCLUSION It is reasonable to see Franklin as one source of American information and ideas within Smith's intellectual world. But historians should avoid claiming that a particular Smith argument came directly from Franklin unless documentary evidence establishes it.

David Hume — Intellectual Friendship

- Franklin and David Hume (1711–1776) corresponded and spent time together during Franklin's Scottish visits.
- Their surviving relationship looks much more like an exchange between respected intellectuals than a teacher-and-pupil relationship.
- Franklin's scientific reputation, colonial experience, and political knowledge gave him unusual standing among European thinkers.

Why Europeans Listened to Franklin

- He was internationally famous for his experiments with electricity.
- The Royal Society awarded him the Copley Medal in 1753.
- He had practical experience with colonial legislatures, taxation, frontier settlement, Native diplomacy, printing, trade, and public opinion.
- European thinkers could theorize about America; Franklin could explain how colonial America actually operated.

KEY POINT Franklin was both a consumer and a producer of Enlightenment knowledge.

The Haudenosaunee Connection

- Franklin had substantial experience with Indigenous diplomacy and knew of the political durability of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

- The Confederacy demonstrated that distinct nations could preserve their identities while cooperating through a common political structure.
- Scholars debate how much direct influence this had on Franklin's political design, so it should be treated as one influence or comparison rather than a simple blueprint.

Reconsidering the Albany Plan

FRANKLIN'S POLITICAL EXPERIMENT

Observe the problem → identify workable models → design a mechanism → attempt cooperation → learn from failure.

- **Problem:** separate colonies could not coordinate defense and diplomacy effectively.
- **Model and experience:** British constitutional traditions, Enlightenment political thought, colonial institutions, and experience with Native confederation.
- **Experiment:** President-General + representative Grand Council + common powers while colonial governments remained.
- **Result:** the plan failed politically, but the problem of union remained.

Book Club Takeaway

- Franklin should not be pictured simply as an American learning sophisticated ideas from Europe.
- He absorbed European ideas, tested them against American experience, and returned information and arguments to European intellectual circles.
- The Albany Plan of 1754 is an early example of Franklin's characteristic method: practical, experimental, cooperative, and aimed at solving a concrete problem.
- By the Revolution, Franklin had become one of the people through whom the American and European Enlightenments spoke to each other.